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WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THE PH.D.

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THE MAJOR ISSUE IN RECENT DISCUSSIONS OF THE PH.D. DEGREE IN ENGLISH IS HOW TO PROVIDE A SUFFICIENT NUMBER OF PH.D.'S TO MEET THE NEEDS OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND PERHAPS ALSO TO LOWER THE ATTRITION RATE AMONG GRADUATE STUDENTS. DESPITE THE ACADEMIC WORLD'S FEAR OF A STATUS DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE UNDERGRADUATE TEACHER AND THE GRADUATE TEACHER, CHANGES IN REQUIREMENTS ARE NECESSARY AND TWO DIFFERENT DEGREES SHOULD BE AWARDED IN ORDER TO SUPPLY AND ACCREDIT ENOUGH UNDERGRADUATE TEACHERS AND TO PREVENT THE PRESENT RESEARCH-ORIENTED PH.D. FROM BECOMING A TEACHING DEGREE ONLY. THE DOCTOR OF LIBERAL ARTS (D.L.A.) DEGREE, WITH A PROGRAM SIMILAR IN EARLY STAGES TO THE PH.D. BUT REQUIRING LESS TIME AND MUCH LESS EMPHASIS ON THE DISSERTATION, WOULD SUPPLY ENOUGH UNDERGRADUATE TEACHERS. THE PH.D., HOWEVER, SHOULD BE REQUIRED FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AND SCHOLARS. A STREAMLINING OF THE PRESENT PH.D. DEGREE, ESPECIALLY THE LENGTH AND SCOPE OF THE DISSERTATION, IS NEEDED, BUT REGARDLESS OF THE SHORTAGE OF DEGREE HOLDERS, THE PH.D. SHOULD NEVER BECOME A TEACHING DEGREE WITH LESS REGARD FOR ITS SCHOLARLY CONTENT. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED AS PART OF "THE ADE BULLETIN," NUMBER 9, SEPTEMBER 1966. (BN)

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WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THE PH.D?

An Address Presented to the CEA of Ohio by Fredson Bowers, Chairman
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No aspect of education in English, save perhaps Freshman Composition, is subject these days to more discussion than the Ph.D. degree. The discussion is by no means idealistically centered. On the contrary, the single focus is intensely practical: what can we do to turn out a sufficient number of Ph.D.'s to meet the rising demand?

The question 'what can we do' has two main parts. The first concerns itself with the recruiting and financing of graduate students. The second deals with changes that might be made in the requirements in order to increase the number of doctorates earned. The degree as it is now set up does not permit a sufficient number of young men and women to complete its training to satisfy the demand. This we all admit. The need, then, is not for more graduate schools -- we have enough of these already. The crude, rock-bottom need is for a degree that more students can pass. Let us not mince words on this matter. Critics of the present requirements can take a stitch here, cut off a furbelow there, shorten the sleeves, and in general do something with outmoded and time-consuming details of the curriculum; but the result of this bringing up to date without alteration of the present basic purpose of the Ph.D. will not provide enough new candidates to meet the crying need from below for more doctorates to satisfy accreditation. Reforms that are sweeping enough to produce a degree that will satisfy this demand will inevitably lower the sights simply to include more students who can pass.

The more elementary proposals for reform aim at a reduction in the time normally devoted to doctoral study as if this were a simple answer in itself to the whole complex problem. Whether or not a serious debasement in the training given by the degree will accompany a speedup on the doctoral assembly-line is usually mentioned only in optimistic generalities.

The more sophisticated proposals attempt to revise the substance of doctoral study with the avowed aim of preparing students in a more realistic manner than at present for their future duties. Usually swept under the rug is the question whether these high-minded and liberalizing proposals do not tacitly envisage an 'easier' degree, which can thus be awarded to a larger number of students than those who now struggle through to the magic three letters.

Although recruiting and financing are matters of prime importance, I must pass them over to look into the conditions that are inevitably going to result in an altered Ph.D.

First, however, let me try to clear the air by a series of unsupported but I think basically accurate statements. The very large number of applications to graduate schools in English attests that the teaching shortage is not due to any lack of interest in those who would like to be college teachers if that were possible. But good will is not enough. The average graduate school that has no limitation in numbers except for prudence is yet forced to reject perhaps a third or more of its applicants when the evidence suggests these lower-level students are not intellectually equipped for the profession of college teaching. To admit C-average students and attempt to instruct them in the art of teaching undergraduates superior to themselves is folly.

The rest of the applicants may be accepted on trial, at least those that find themselves able or ultimately willing to take up their admission. Of these entrants well over fifty percent prove themselves to be intellectually or competitively equipped to go no further than the one-year M.A. degree. I am not talking now in terms of rigorous Ph.D. requirements beyond present or future reason. It is simply a fact that fifty percent and over of the students who each year enter graduate school with their undergraduate B average find, inevitably, that they fall into one of these four main categories of failure to proceed:

(1) They themselves come to recognize that in their first graduate year they have reached the upper limit of their capacities, and that a degree requiring a higher level of intellectual application than the M.A. is not worth the effort and would probably result in failure.

(2) They are borderline students who may even be anxious to continue to a higher degree; but the institution is so uncertain of their success that it does not wish to commit itself to encourage them to proceed, and therefore withholds financial support and urges them to seek a less difficult graduate school if they propose to continue.

(3) Often in connection with the above two factors, but sometimes affecting even perfectly competent students, the discovery is made that perhaps the commitment to scholarship and teaching was not so firm as had been fancied, and the student wants to try his hand at the real thing (or perhaps some other work) for a year or so to discover his real motivation before he puts more of his time and money into graduate school.

(4) Various personal reasons arise, in bewildering variety, including a preference for creative writing instead of critical scholarship; latent psychiatric disorders brought on by the pressure of work and competition; mental fatigue after four gruelling college years, with never-ending classes, seminars, papers, examinations still stretching ahead. Or a burden of debt assumed in college and now increasing at a frightening rate, often with the problem of supporting a non-working wife and children in near-slum conditions. Or -- as often with girls -- a realization that a crush on literature and its heroes like Messrs. Faulkner and Hemingway takes on a less exciting aspect in the professional atmosphere of graduate school and that the marriageable years are passing. Or -- and here the critics of the system have been severe -- a disenchantment may arise with the methods and aims of graduate school, a belief that it deadens creativity and does not offer the student what he came to get. Certainly, not all persons who feel an intense pleasure in reading literature are necessarily able to become teachers.

Even if the proportion of dropouts after the M.A. were no more than fifty percent -- and I believe it is usually much greater, perhaps two-thirds at this point, or near it -- attrition of other varieties, some related to the above, continues to operate so that perhaps no more than fifteen to twenty percent (indeed perhaps no more ultimately than ten percent, the country over) finally ends with the Ph.D. And I would not want to guess what proportion secures a Ph.D in what is a reasonable period, which may be set at four years for the full-time student. Perhaps five percent? Who knows?

It would be wrong to assume that all of the dropouts from the Ph.D program are barred from college teaching so that the main cause for the shortage of teachers is the Cerberus of the Ph.D., as some critics seem to imply. In recent years the M.A. has got many a student a job teaching in a small college instead of a high school or junior college, and the trend is up, with an especially brisk market developing in the aristocrat of all, the A.B.D. (all-but-the-dissertation). Since the Ph.D. candidate is more and more going to the universities and less and less to the colleges, the undergraduate institutions must be staffed somehow; but the present M.A. is not really sufficient for their purposes, and no one believes now that the old-fashioned M.A. can be revived.

Let me say, however, that it is a mistake to believe that any shortage of warm bodies exists in this country to fill college teaching jobs. The shortage is purely and simply confined to teachers who by conventional standards lack the ultimate qualification for college teaching, that is, the Ph.D.

If we were to formulate other standards than the Ph.D. -- as I firmly believe we ought -- then the problem of college teaching would rapidly begin to solve itself, given adequate financial support. In my opinion it is perfectly possible to create a program that would produce an adequate number of acceptably trained undergraduate teachers, a program that would intermesh at an early stage, for economy, with the Ph.D. training but would cut off a year or two earlier, with omission of the dissertation, at an intermediate point between the present M.A. and the research Ph.D.

Something like this program now has the unofficial status of A.B.D., but I should like to see professional standing, respectability, and a higher earning power given to such students by the award of a Doctor of Liberal Arts, the D.L.A., which would be sufficient for its purpose as accrediting undergraduate teachers. Those who wished to aim for the universities could thereupon carry on to the research degree, the Ph.D., suitable for its particular purposes.

What we have now done is to take the Ph.D. in English, originally formulated as a research degree, and to turn it into a teaching requirement on the assumption that teaching and research are synonymous. The fact is that the Ph.D. was originally a pure scholarly degree, with strong research implications; but the misfortune that it has become the college teacher's union card has placed so much pressure upon it that it must either be abandoned or reshaped if it is to continue to be the union card. There is no other choice. Or, I suggest, it is much the more sensible procedure to maintain its original research status and to transfer its union-card function to another degree, the teaching D.L.A.

If I were to formulate the ideal training for an undergraduate teacher, I would not invent the present Ph.D. But if I were to formulate a research-oriented degree for a university teacher, which is to say for a man trained for graduate-school instruction, I would come out with something very close to the present Ph.D. This distinction between undergraduate and graduate instruction sharpens a cleavage that speakers are usually too polite to mention. But I feel strongly on this taboo subject, and I hope my bluntness of comment will be forgiven.

Only a few teachers are so learned but dull that they should be segregated for the exclusive instruction of graduate students. The usual university teacher ought to be, and is, competent in both areas of instruction. But not every teacher who is ideally suited to deal with undergraduates at their level of interest and of attainment is necessarily equally competent to carry knowledge and criticism forward to its frontiers as happens with the ideal graduate teacher dealing with older and selected students. Yet we pour both of these temperaments into the same mould, force both to take a Ph.D. in order to assure their professional standing, and then quietly permit the college teacher for the rest of his life to neglect large areas of his training in the course of his professional duties.

If we will face openly and frankly a few simple facts of life -- one of them being that the strictly undergraduate teacher does not need the peculiar kind of research training that the graduate teacher will need -- we might do something sensible about advanced education in this country. But it is hard to beat a slogan. The moment someone accuses a speaker of making second-class citizens out of the college teachers by implying that a difference may exist between them and their university brethren in temperament, in basic interests, competitiveness, and even in intellectual attainments (if research interests do indeed imply these, which I doubt), then the great American guilt-complex operates. We can no longer have cleaning women, we must have cleaning ladies; a plumber must be a sanitary engineer because another group of trained men are called civil engineers; and so we must

solemnly assume in public that every college teacher is never happy away from his research, devotes his whole spare time to scribbling away like mad for PMLA, and could walk into any advanced graduate seminar and turn them on their heads if only he had the opportunity. Milton was not afraid of setting up hierarchies among the angels, because God loved each of them equally, without difference. But the academic world is scared stiff of the distinction between the excellent undergraduate teacher and the excellent graduate teacher, who often are indeed two different breeds of cat; and so we have the levelling Ph.D., which makes us all brothers and sisters under the skin, all equal, as well as all equals, all in fact nonsense. NCTE and MLA would not exist as separate organizations if it were not nonsense, nor would the College English Association, perhaps.

The slogan that the Doctor of Liberal Arts would be a second class degree seems to be in the process of licking the sensible distinction of separate and respectable degrees for undergraduate and for graduate teachers; and the odds seem to favor the prospect that we are going to be stuck with the Ph.D. as the passport to college teaching. (However, the Muscatine Report in Education at Berkeley recommends immediate legislation to institute the Doctor of Arts, and so there may be some hope after all.) The immediate anomaly now appears that the ratio of holders of the Ph.D., although nearly one hundred percent in the professorial ranks of the universities, is dropping in the colleges to a figure close to twenty-five percent or less.

The present Ph.D., therefore, cannot be a passport to college teaching because both its methods and its standards are such that despite every recruiting and financing effort the supply of raw material to shape into Doctors of Philosphy is insufficient to withstand the attrition rate among entering graduate students. That is, to be precise, the graduate schools these days are turning out enough Ph.D.'s to staff the universities, but not enough to staff more than twenty-five percent of the department members in the colleges, and the NDEA program even if expanded is not going to make a great deal of difference in this percentage as against the rising demand. It follows as the night the day that if the colleges continue to demand the Ph.D. as even a fifty percent ideal, if not requirement, then something must be done to the Ph.D. to reduce the attrition rate by making it possible for more students to succeed.

Discussion of this question always carefully omits any reference to reduced standards, which is the heart of the matter, and concentrates on what are thought to be anachronistic roadblocks to progress that are still built-in to the degree. One school of thought argues for making the degree more attractive so that the dropouts of gifted but not very rigorously minded students will be reduced. In the words of a recent MLA document that seeks funds for a study, "The shortage is caused not only by the increased demand but also by a general dissatisfaction with the traditional requirements for the English Ph.D. which are still philologically and historically oriented at a time when most students and an increasing number of graduate professors see the need for a more critical and pedagogical orientation."

With this movement away from the philological and historical I am in full sympathy, but I do not find in my experience that it is a major cause for lack of candidates for graduate schools or for an excessive dropout rate except perhaps among the most weakly committed graduate students, who would very likely find the demands of college teaching too rigorous as well. The hard fact is that we are beating a dead horse. The day of the philological Ph.D. has practically vanished, and critical scholarship has largely replaced historical in the most popular fields so that the aims and methods of much course work and of many dissertations are by no means inconsistent with a full critical and pedagogical orientation.

It may be that some weaker and therefore self-consciously conservative graduate schools still perpetuate the old myth; but the stronger schools have long since had confidence enough to alter their ways as a matter of tacit if not explicit policy. If students think otherwise it is either because they have selected the

wrong mentors from fossilized relicts of the old system or else because they are perpetual undergraduates, perpetually demanding that they be first amused and then instructed, as if entertainment and learning were not synonymous to anyone fully committed to his subject as a college teacher should be.

Student demand as reflected by the popularity of certain disciplines and their course programs within English is rapidly altering the ways of graduate schools alert to the winds of change, as any analysis of the new programs submitted for NDEA support will illustrate. When a department institutes courses in critical theory and practice, in contemporary literature, in the relations of European to English and American writers, and so on, and finds that they consistently double and triple the number of students who want to study in these areas, and that such programs attract first-rate students who would otherwise go to a rival graduate school, these lessons are not lost in pedagogic councils among ambitious graduate schools. Never fear.

If anything, the movement is being accelerated towards a more lively and meaningful view of literature in the future as the younger members of the departments, trained in this new outlook, begin to take over graduate courses and to teach the range of their own interests. I see this happening, and it is a good thing. Critics who bemoan the stultifying demands of exacting, dry-as-dust historical scholarship and the discouragement these present to the inquiring student are living in the past and do not know what they are talking about. Unfortunately, they have been the most vocal breastbeaters of late in the public prints. Let us dismiss once and for all such talk. It is not applicable to most institutions in the modern world.

More practical minded critics are presently trying to do something about what may be anachronisms in the usual Ph.D. requirements that promote unnecessary delay. A committee of which I had the honor to be a member met last June in New York representing NCTE, MLA, and ADE, the Association of Departments of English. It discussed the streamlining of the Ph.D., and after approving a four-year stint beyond the B.A. as the norm to aim at, it came up with four main recommendations, which were thereupon printed in PMLA.

(1) A superior knowledge in depth of one foreign language was to be preferred to the present bowing acquaintance with two.

(2) A doctoral student should master a reasonable coverage of literature in English, with concentration in one or more areas.

(3) A dissertation reduced in length and scope, in some cases even a collection of articles or essays, should be acceptable.

(4) Students should not be exploited as teaching assistants for the simple convenience of the department.

Every one here should read the wise comments of Indiana's C. L. Barber on this conference, as printed in the ADE Bulletin for January 1966. They sum up perfectly, I think, the dilemma of the committee and the way in which its discussion tended.

Actually, no bombshell is contained in these proposals. That four years is the proper period for a full-time student to devote to the doctorate is scarcely arguable except on practical grounds, to which I shall return in a moment. Many universities are beginning to stress the first language at the expense of a second, but this pedagogical shift in emphasis will save very little time for most students. Not since the Harvard of my youth has a student been supposed to answer detailed questions on the whole range of English literature in his Ph.D. oral; I wonder what graduate schools are not selective in their examinations?

I do believe that the dissertation is frequently more time consuming than its value warrants to the student who shows no talent for research. I also believe that the fault for excessive delay lies with the student on at least some occasions. I sometimes need to resort to something close to physical force to persuade an over-conscientious student that he has put enough time and effort into his dissertation, and that it is acceptable if only he will take the clichés and the awkwardnesses out of the style.

Critics who trace original sin back to the dissertation are out of date these days and are belaboring the system of their youth, not of the present. In the last two decades a marked decrease in scope and thus in length has occurred. I still remember the shock I felt when teaching one summer at a quite major university I saw how cut down its dissertations were. It was a very salutary experience.

As for the subject matter, no one takes seriously any more the traditional adage that a dissertation should make an original contribution to human knowledge. A glance at any current series of dissertation abstracts reveals that dissertations basically critical in method and in outlook are now in the majority; and that a rather extended critical essay is usually acceptable. I believe that we need to turn a continual eye on the dissertation so that it will be kept in proportion with the rest of the Ph.D. program and not be allowed to usurp an exaggeratedly large share of the student's time and energies. I have personal acquaintance with several recent cases in which directors have insisted on a research dissertation spread over at least three years, and the young men are still trying to satisfy quite exorbitant demands in the old-fashioned manner. But I suspect that such cases are becoming more and more the effect of individuals and not of the system. The situation is not one of unrelieved gloom, however. At least, when I interview prospective young assistant professors at MLA each year after Christmas, they solemnly assure me they are sure to get their degrees in June or August because they have already got a subject for their dissertation and have started their research. I used to argue that no more than a year should be spent on a dissertation. Now we seem to have six-month ones at some institutions.

Finally, any resolution that deplores exploitation of graduate students is a pious fraud so long as it does not simultaneously solve two problems: first, the provision of sufficient cash fellowship funds to relieve a competent student -- not just the superior one but the ordinarily competent run-of-the-mine variety -- from having to earn his living while studying for the Ph.D.; and, second, the provision of sufficient funds by state legislatures so that graduate instructors at slave-labor rates are not a financial necessity to instruct the hordes of students in elementary courses. Perhaps a third should be added, the provision of enough full-time man-power to take over the slack left by putting graduate instructors on an apprentice-teaching basis. Where such personnel is to come from in a world already short of college teachers is a mystery. Indeed, the difficulties of overblown state universities in the mid and far West are so tremendous both in respect to funds and to securing adequate sources of teaching manpower for freshman courses, especially on a full-time basis, as to make almost insoluble any instant solution to the six and seven-year Ph.D. for those who must work for a living. Little by little, as government money flows in, no doubt there will be a slow movement away from the old system of working one's way through graduate school. But the movement will be slow, because the trouble is practical, not idealogical, and serious changes in the instruction of elementary courses will need to be made to release the manpower to a fellowship system in many institutions.

In short, I do not see that collectively or individually, the four major PMLA propositions strike at the heart of the problem. What university in the country cannot give a four-year Ph.D. to students who come with their language requirements satisfied, who can pass their courses and their preliminary examinations on schedule without robbing Peter to pay Paul, who can engage themselves to a dissertation that

will take no more than a calendar year from start to finish? But what students except for the elite can succeed in pushing through with such a program, and what students -- even the elite -- can find full financial support for four whole years, including summers when they must be pursuing independent study programs? The NDEA fellowships do not fulfill these requirements, and even with the promised expansion in this program how many of the end-products, after all the usual attrition will land in the hungry colleges and not the universities?

There is nothing for it, the degree is going to be debased if the Ph.D. remains as the necessary status symbol for college teaching. That is, if the assumed needs of the colleges dictate the content and the method of the degree, the Ph.D. will no longer be suitable for university-type practising scholars. The first of the MLA conferences is scheduled to discuss the proposal that these scholars be saved by a system of one-year or more post-doctoral fellowships in which a much reduced formal exercise of a dissertation for the average student is reworked and expanded into a publishable book or series of articles by those selected for a life of active scholarship.

I would not wish to prejudge this conference and the proposals that will be advanced. If something in the Ph.D. system has to give, I would as soon it be an emphasis on the dissertation, which of all the requirements is the least necessary for training the undergraduate teacher. But I was taught at Harvard that excellence seeps down from the top and does not rise from beneath. I am suspicious of any proposals that will serve to isolate the research training in the Ph.D. and to concentrate it in a post-doctoral year, thereby establishing an unofficial elite who, no matter what their true interests, will soon find it required to have a post-doctoral year in order to get a job in a university. Paradoxically, the Ph.D. might well be lengthened instead of shortened for many students, unless a <u>three</u>-year Ph.D. is suggested for the elite, with a fourth year of guided research in some institute if not at the home graduate school.

But what kind of an advanced degree would a three-year Ph.D. be? A teaching degree? My blood runs cold when I hear the flat statement "The Ph.D should be a teaching degree." We all know that in English almost every Doctor of Philosophy goes into teaching, since there is little economic demand for his English degree in any other profession. Just as I deplore any attempt to distinguish scholarship and criticism, so I deplore any attempt to separate scholarship from teaching. Yet once one remarks that the Ph.D. is a teaching degree, one can no longer hold the line on scholarship, and softhearted examiners will pass many an intellectually incompetent student in a Ph.D. oral with the argument that he will be a useful teacher in some small Southern college.

On the other hand, to assert that only a trained practising scholar can be a good teacher is to assert nonsense. If training students in critical scholarship, whether the subject is Shakespeare or Faulkner, is not training a teacher in the best possible way, then I have mistaken my profession. If one can substitute in a raw young graduate student controlled thinking for subjective emotional response, if one can instill a respect for logical analysis of critical ideas, and some methods for performing this operation, if one can demonstrate that knowledge in depth leads to understanding, to discrimination, and finally to love of a living literature on an informed, not a naive and formless basis, then one has trained a scholar as well as a teacher. Where is the difference between them?

Our Ph.D. program is tending in this direction, but let me point out a danger or two. Any proposal for Ph.D. reform that can be accepted generally throughout the country -- and no other kind is worth discussing -- must be adjusted to the abilities of the large Ph.D. graduate schools, like the Big Ten, that turn out doctoral candidates by the hundreds with only limited fellowship support. It will be

totally unrealistic to formulate recommendations, no matter how enlightened, that are tailored only to the limited-admission graduate schools like Yale, Princeton, or Hopkins, which have an entering class of less than a score of students each, instead of several hundred, and which can support a generally deserving student for the length of his degree.

Moreover, any proposal must be adjusted to mesh with the terminal M.A. program of large graduate schools, not aimed at the preselected Ph.D. candidate of the limited-admission schools which ignore the M.A. altogether except as a consolation prize.

Also, the program must take into account the average, satisfactory performer, but not at the expense of the superior student. If the four-year program is adjusted to the general level of average performance, then the superior students will suffer in training as well as in morale.

On one point, to conclude, I shope the whole academic community will stand firm. No matter what shortage of degree-holders develops, the Ph.D. must under no circumstances come to be an out-and-out teaching degree with lesser regard for its scholarly content. If the proponents of apprentice teaching, of training in the teaching of freshman composition, or whatever, succeed in making such simple skills a required part of the Ph.D. requirements, we shall end with glorified education schools.

The only program for the college teacher is the one that will train him not in the so-called skills but in his intellectual ability to deal with literature at a sufficiently sophisticated level of taste and informed criticism. This is the only acceptable end for scholarship in teaching. No batteries of information tests, no formal or informal instruction in the conduct of a classroom or the organization of a lecture or the proper grading of a theme is so much the function of a learned degree that it can substitute for the aging in the wood, the inner change to understanding, the intellectual enlightenment that the years of graduate study should bring to those who are to be the teachers, as well as the scholars. And by scholars, finally, I do not mean only the publishing scholars, but instead the whole community of those who read, who meditate, who learn, who evaluate, and then with taste and intelligence bring their thinking and reading to bear on literature presented as an art, a cultural force, an intellectual stimulant, to undergraduate or to graduate audiences. This is the laying on of hands by which scholars and teachers are made.

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